apse association for public service excellence

Trend Analysis 2021/22

Parks

Briefing 23/12

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Trend Analysis 2021/22
Local authority parks

This analysis was conducted by Wayne Priestley, APSE Principal Advisor for Parks

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About APSE

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK.

Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority frontline services and operates one of the UK's largest research programmes in local government policy and frontline service delivery matters.

1 Overview

APSE performance networks has been comparing parks, open spaces and horticultural services data from a wide selection of local authorities throughout the UK since 1998/99, reporting results annually across a broad range of performance indicators. The summary looks each year at the continuing trends within the service to provide participating authorities with further evidence of how their performance sits within the broader national picture as well as what the trends infer and what further activity and analysis individual authorities and the APSE benchmarking group could consider. The analysis is based on averages across the whole service and compares this year's figures (2021/22) with previously submitted data.

The APSE performance networks service provides performance indicators for various dimensions of performance, particularly cost, productivity, quality and customer satisfaction. This summary deals with each theme in turn using data from final returns for 2021/22 against final returns from previous years. As authorities continue to submit data after the publication of the first batch service reports, the averages for each performance indicator will have changed slightly. Therefore, depending on the performance of the late returnees, the trends may be different to most reported at first batch.

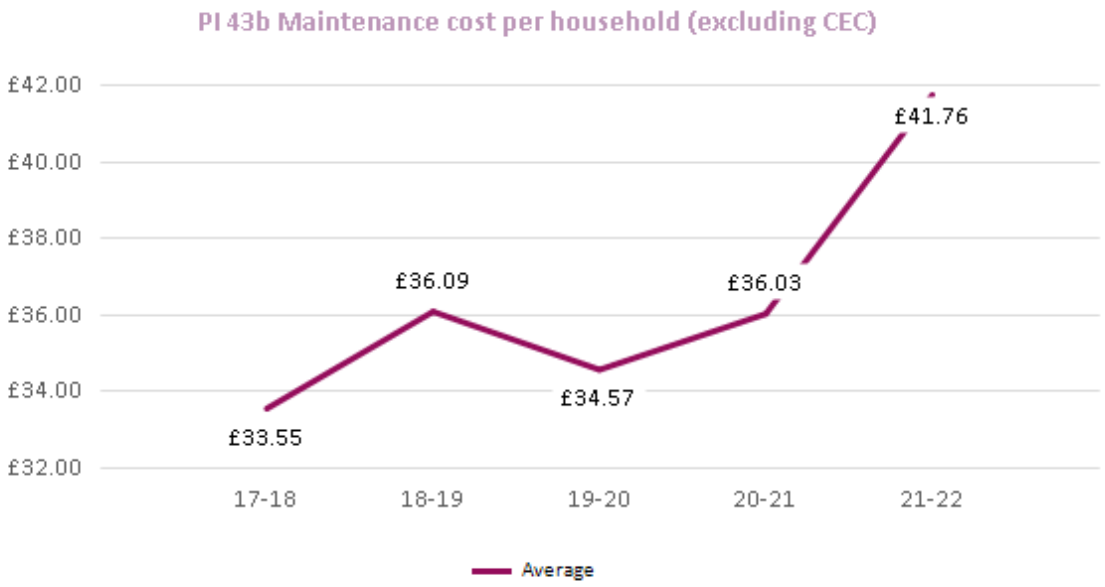
2 Trend analysis

It should be noted that in 2021/22 was still being impacted by the tail-end of the Coronavirus pandemic, there were a series of national lockdowns which had major impacts on the ability to deliver standard frontline services, both regarding costs and quality. Consequently, it is likely that many results for 2021/22 will still continue to be very different from the general trends seen in the pre Coronavirus pandemic years.

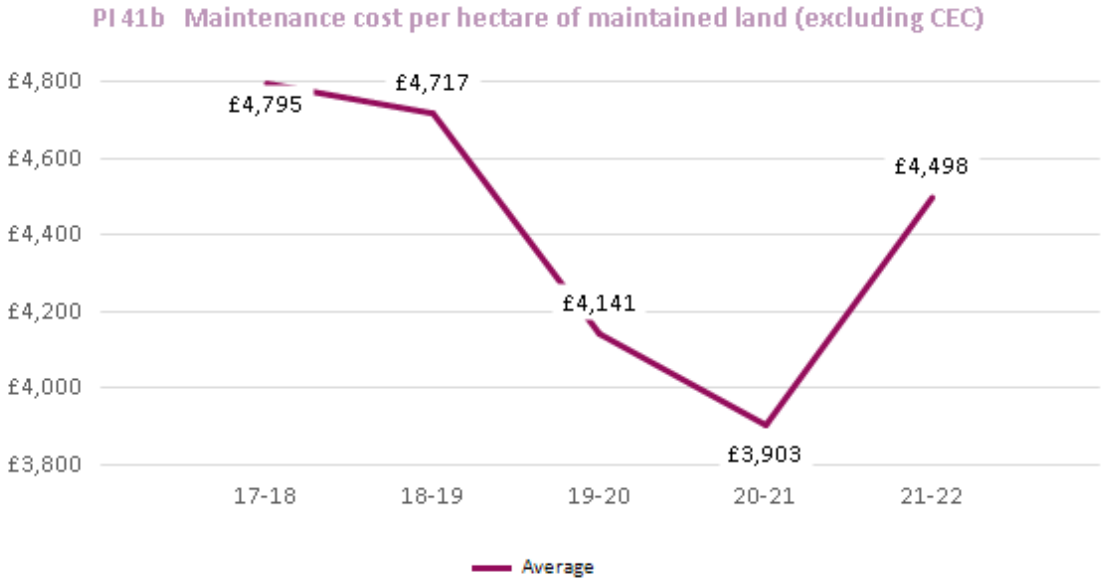
Trend analysis carried out annually has shown average performance fluctuate over the years, reflecting internal changes made by local authorities to negate budget reductions through service reviews in an attempt to maintain standards and provide more innovative ways of managing and operating the parks service.

3 Cost

Maintenance cost per household (PI 43b), has continued to rise during 2021/22, but this perhaps is not surprising as this was still during the period of the Coronavirus pandemic when many services were subject to additional operating costs associated with COVID. It is also likely to be a reflection of the continuing increased use of greenspaces by people who sought refuge for exercise and recreation. As a consequence, the management of green spaces took on the need to address the impact of higher levels of footfall and the additional costs of wear and tear as well as removing litter and other wastes left as a result of the large numbers of people using these spaces, subsequently leading to higher overall service costs



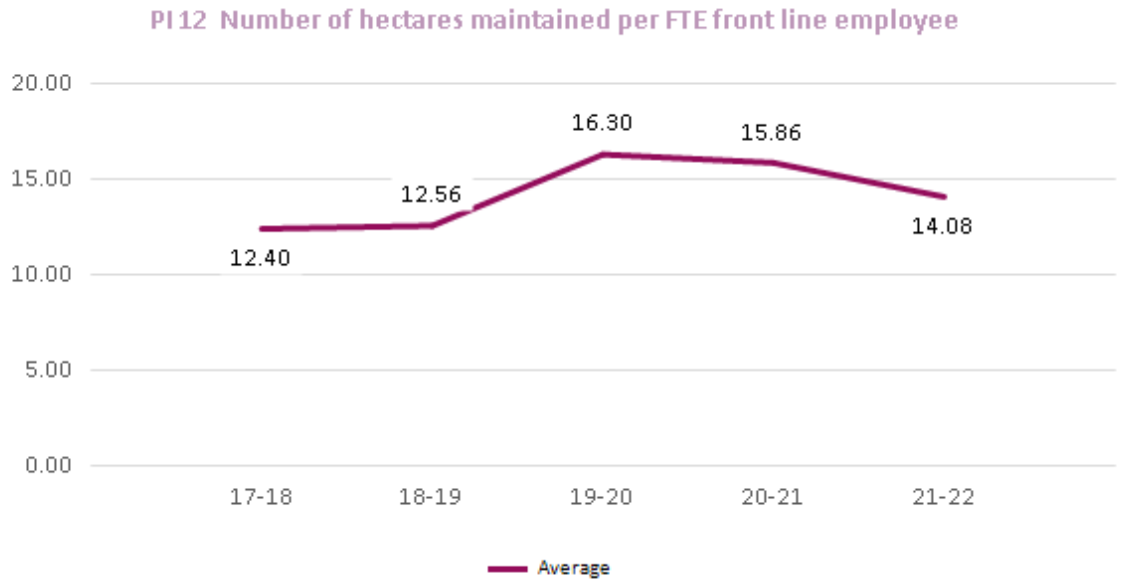
This result (PI 41b) is an interesting one, During the start of the Coronavirus pandemic 2020/21 when lockdowns were introduced and staff may have been reduced in numbers less land would have been maintained at the same frequency and standards. However, as the lockdowns eased during 2021/22, staff were returning to work and by association, returning frequencies of maintenance back to pre-Covid standards, which has shown in the costs per household returning back towards pre-pandemic levels.



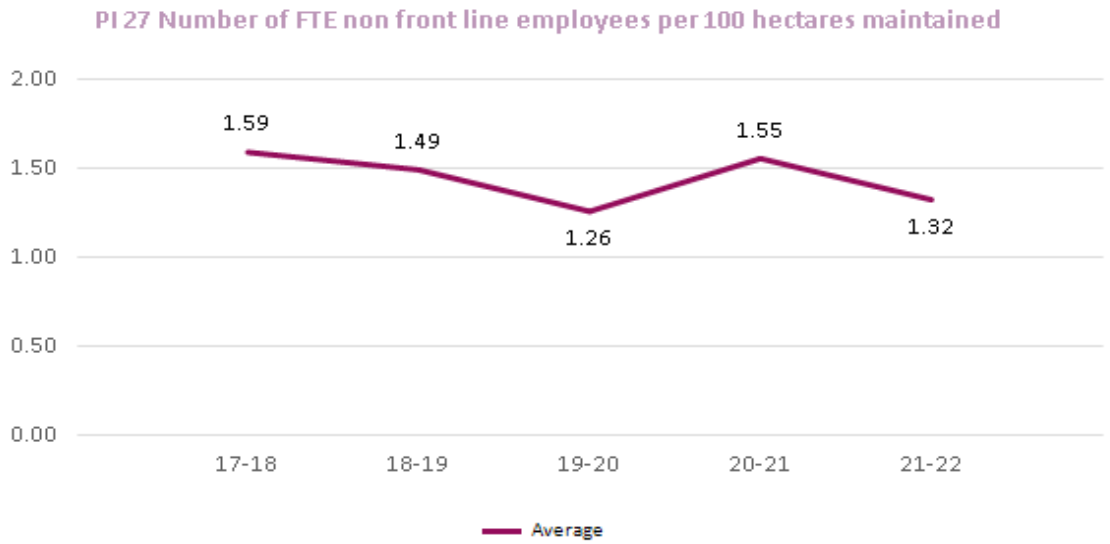
4 Productivity

Surprisingly there has been a decrease in productivity, (PI 12) although this may be a result of staff having to spend longer returning land back to its pre-COVID levels due to its increased use as a leisure outlet during the Covid lockdowns. Greenspace areas certainly experienced a higher level of usage than would be normally expected and some of the extra work would have been repairing

pathways, returfing areas, litter removal, re-instating flower beds and other horticultural features etc. all of which may have been affected by the large number of people who flocked to parks during the peak of the Covid pandemic, consequently not all the land requiring maintenance may have been able to be covered and therefore left out of the equation.



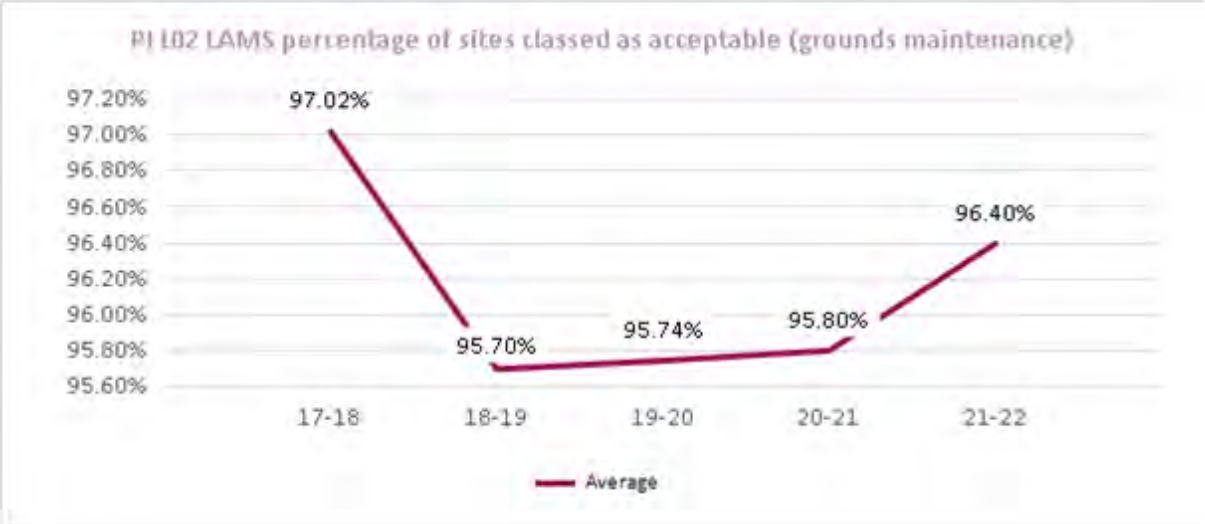
The rise in PI27 in 2020/21 may have been a result of some extra staff being employed in those parks where large visitor numbers were being experienced to cover both maintenance and security/social distancing requirements. 2021/22 had some degree of easing in these Covid associated requirements areas and as such staffing levels would have returned to a level of normality.



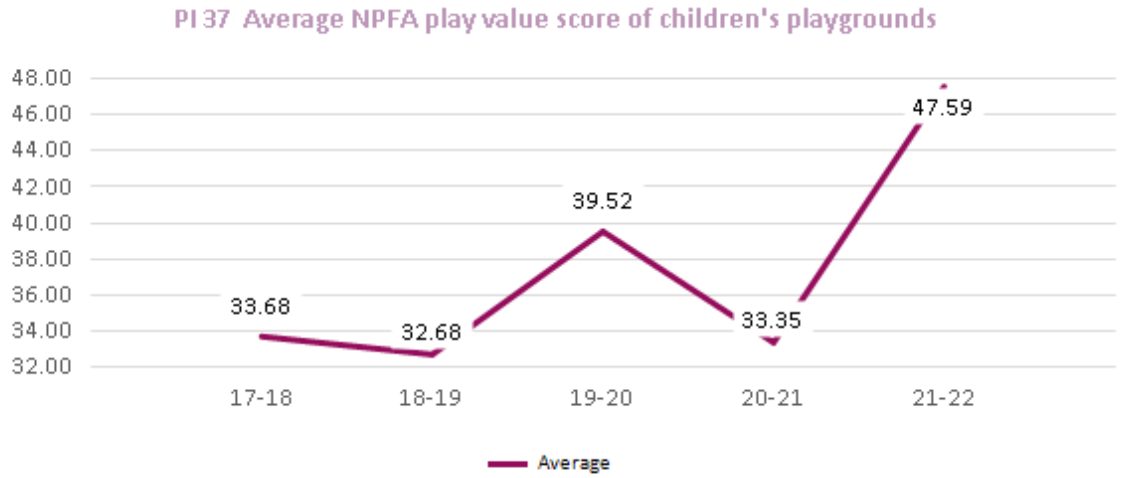
5 Quality

Despite the demands of Covid, the number of acceptable sites wasn't heavily affected, which is commendable. In 21/22, the number of acceptable sites has increased (PI L02), which is likely due

to the more extreme elements of Covid requirements i.e. lockdowns, social distancing, self-isolating being lifted to a large degree. More staff returned to their normal work duties, including removing litter, restoring horticultural elements and returning parks infrastructure to the required standard. It will be interesting to see how cleanliness levels fare in the long term given that restrictions have been lifted and numbers of visitors appear to be higher than normal.



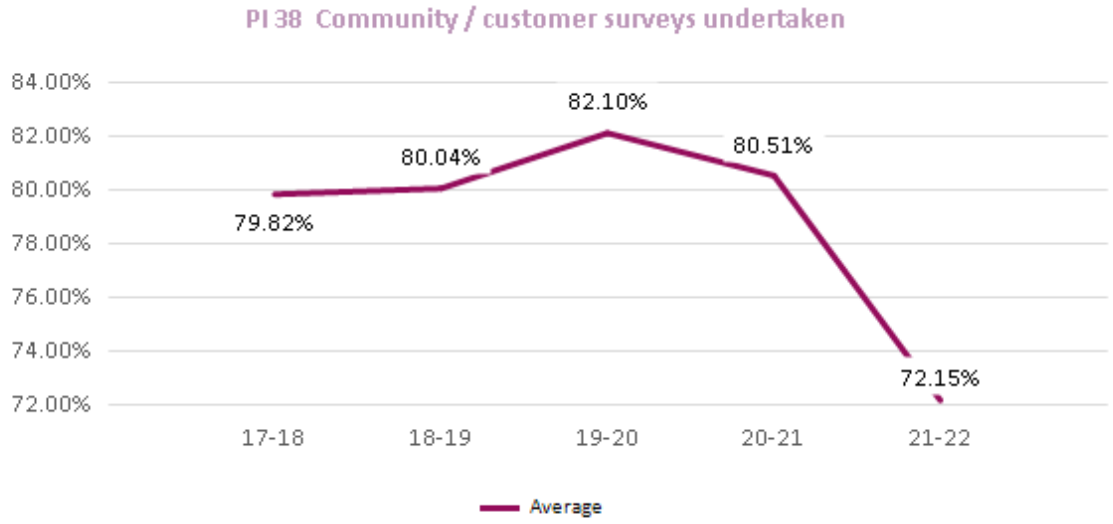
Unsurprisingly, quality during 2020/21 suffered across many local authority services due to the impacts of the pandemic. With fewer staff available, standards fell and some playgrounds were closed. With the lifting of COVID restrictions playgrounds will have returned back to the required standards and their features now fully accessible to users resulting in an improved score for 2021/22.



6 Customer satisfaction

A dip in customer satisfaction during 2020/21 was not unexpected due to the pandemic and the impact this had on many services in parks being closed or suspended e.g., children's playgrounds, tennis courts, café and toilet closures and restrictions on movement etc. Added to this would have been larger than normal crowds, some anti-social behaviour, reduced horticultural standards and just a general difference in the overall parks experience for many.

What is perhaps surprising, was that despite all of these negative factors, the fall in satisfaction was so low, with over 80% of respondents still satisfied with their local parks and grounds maintenance services. However, 2021/22 has seen a significant continued drop in customer satisfaction. This is no doubt due to the fact parks have seen continuing high levels of visitors who are now expecting high standards in their parks and there may therefore be something of a time lag between what visitors expect and the practical ability to return standards and facilities to what they were pre-Covid. It should also be remembered that parks budgets are still the same or in many cases declining which means they may be unable to meet these expectations especially as greater park usage is putting added pressure on already stretched resources.



7 APSE comment

It is clear that the findings of the trend analysis have still been affected by the impacts of the pandemic and as such some of the figures and performance levels have been affected either negatively or positively and care needs to be taken when reading this briefing note. It is likely that it will take another twelve months before a more stable picture can be ascertained.

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